BUSINESS

Remote employees work longer and harder, studies show

BY DANIEL DE VISÉ - 07/24/23 5:30 AM ET

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Remote work became possible long before the pandemic. Many employers resisted it on a hunch that employees working from home might spend too much of their workday watching Oprah and shopping on eBay.

Then came COVID-19, which launched a vast, forced experiment in telework. The results are in: As it turns out, most remote workers are not incurable slackers.

One of the most celebrated studies, which tracked more than 60,000 Microsoft employees over the first half of 2020, found that remote work triggered a 10 percent boost in weekly hours.

Remote employees are working more, in part, because they are commuting less. Another landmark study, based on data from 27 countries, found that remote workers saved 72 minutes in daily commuting time. On average, employees spent about half an hour of that extra time engaged in daily work: more than two hours a week.

Not only do remote workers log longer hours, but they also seem to get work done at a faster clip. An oft-cited, pre-pandemic study of workers in a Chinese travel agency found a 13 percent boost in performance for home workers. They worked more hours per shift, and each hour was a bit more productive.

The success of America's remote work experiment may have been a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In the early pandemic months, some remote workers felt imprisoned in their homes. In hindsight, however, that ennui was probably more about the pandemic itself than remote work, which has proven wildly popular.

Gallup polling shows a dramatic rise in the share of Americans who prefer to work at home at least part of the time, from 40 percent in 2019 to a near-unanimous 94 percent in 2022.

Some workplace experts theorize remote workers have an incentive to work harder: They don't want to lose the privilege of working at home.

"I think it's because people are motivated to keep the arrangement, and so that motivation drives the productivity. They want it to work," said Tammy Allen, a distinguished professor of psychology at the University of South Florida who studies work and family.

Whatever their motivation, remote workers have proven America's employees are capable of working from home without succumbing to the temptations of channel-surfing and shopping.

whether they're at the home or the office," said Matthew Bidwell, an associate professor of management at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

And the other 10 percent to 20 percent? Some of them will do too little work if allowed to work from home. Some will do too much.

Bidwell speaks regularly to groups of executives, and he has heard scattered reports of a new phenomenon: remote work moonlighting.

"There are these employees who have two or three full-time jobs," he said. Because they work remotely, some moonlighters are able to trick two (or even three) employers into thinking they are giving each job their full attention.

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"It is a concern," he said. "I can't believe many people are doing it. I think the experience has been widespread enough that companies are really worried about it."

Other remote workers hold only one job but don't put in much effort. They manifest the fears that hindered the remote-work revolution in the years before the pandemic set it off.

"That is the number one thing, pre-COVID, that managers would always bring up," said Barbara Larson, executive professor of management at Northeastern University's D'Amore-McKim School of Business. "'If I let people work from home, they're just going to be shopping on eBay all day.' And my answer to that is, 'Guess what? Those employees were already shopping on eBay all day. They were just able to hide it.'"

Remote work has reshaped the American workplace. Nearly 30 percent of all work happened at home in the first half of this year, compared to 5 percent before the

to half.

Although workplaces have shifted, broader data on the American workforce suggest that most of us are working about the same hours now as before the remote work wave.

Full-time workers logged 42 hours a week in 2022, compared to 42.5 hours in pre-pandemic 2019, according to Census data gathered from American households.

Another data set, collected from employers, shows the average workweek is about the same now as before the pandemic, about 34.5 hours.

Productivity, a measure of goods and services produced per hour of work, is higher now than before the pandemic. Productivity declined from 2022 to 2023, setting off a few alarm bells, but remote work seems to be only one of several factors.

Just as some remote workers adapt better than others, some types of work seem better suited to telework.

“Individual work, in general, is a whole lot easier when we work remotely, as compared to teamwork and collaborative work,” said Anat Lechner, a clinical associate professor of management and organizations at New York University’s Stern School of Business. “If we have to work together, that’s a mess. That’s complicated.”

The Microsoft study found collaborative work became “more static and siloed” with remote work. Remote workers collaborated less. Real-time communication dropped, while “asynchronous” talk via email and instant messaging rose apace.

Remote work recast the working day. Microsoft research spawned talk of the “triple-peak” workday replacing the old 9-to-5 routine. Work peaks in the morning, tapers off at lunchtime, peaks again in the afternoon and declines steadily into the evening, only to peak again at night.

“You may have folks who are tending to family issues on weekday afternoons,” Allen said. “But then, after they put the kids to bed, they can return to work.”

Answering emails at 10 p.m. may not sound ideal. Just as remote work blurs the old work-home divide, it may throw an employee’s work-life balance out of whack.

Yet, most remote workers seem to have no problem finding balance. Since 2020, remote

"You're always going to have that 5 percent that crave social interaction and really want to be in the office full time," Allen said.

Researchers may never really know whether employees log more or fewer hours at home, for the simple reason that work is hard to measure.

When an office worker chats with colleagues, drinks coffee, checks email and toggles among two dozen websites in an hour, does all of that count as work? Some employees chalk up the commute as work time, even if their employers do not.

"How do I measure the hours that I work?" Bidwell said. "I could come up with some really large numbers or some really small numbers, depending on how stringent I'm being."

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